

Research Briefing

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By Matthew Burton,
Richard Tunnicliffe

Membership of political parties in Great Britain



Summary

- 1 Trends in UK political party memberships
- 2 Membership as a proportion of the electorate
- 3 Broader membership of the Labour movement
- 4 Characteristics of party members and supporters
- 5 Non-party political activity and engagement

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Contents

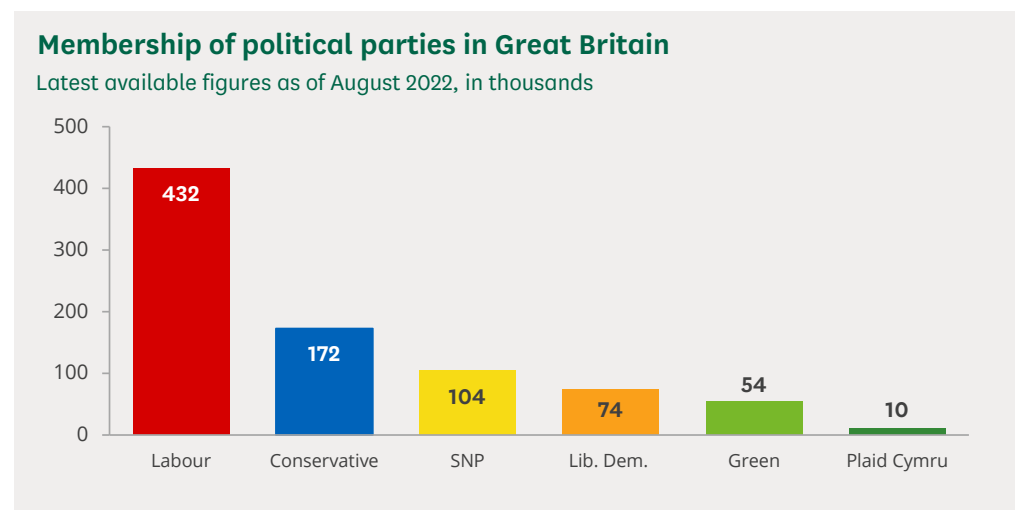
Summary	4
1 Trends in UK political party memberships	6
1.1 About the data	6
1.2 Historical trends: 1930-2022	7
1.3 Membership trends by Party	9
2 Membership as a proportion of the electorate	17
3 Broader membership of the Labour movement	19
4 Characteristics of party members and supporters	21
4.1 Social composition of party membership	21
4.2 Reasons for party membership	25
4.3 Members' engagement with their party	26
4.4 Identification and affiliation with political parties	27
5 Non-party political activity and engagement	29
5.1 Trade union membership	29
5.2 Interest in politics	32

Summary

This paper presents party membership data published by the Electoral Commission, together with estimates from political parties' head offices, press releases, media reports and academic studies.

Latest available data

As of August 2022, estimates from political parties' head offices, press releases and media reports indicate the following membership numbers:



Sources:

Labour, Lib Dems, SNP, Greens: Electoral Commission, [Reports and Accounts](#), August 2022

Financial Times, [Liz Truss to be UK prime minister after winning Tory leadership race](#), August 2022

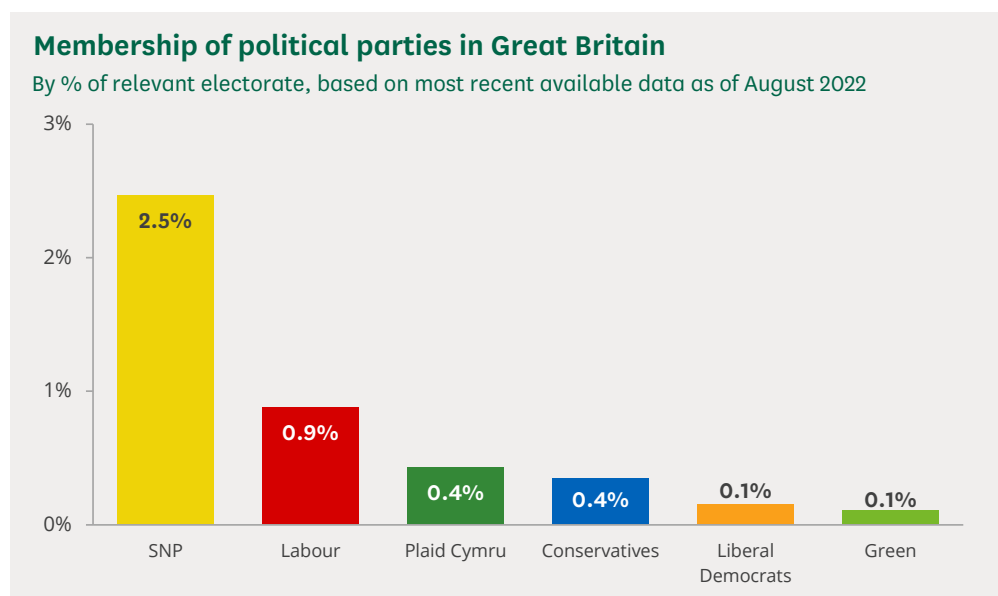
Library correspondence with Plaid Cymru head office, August 2022

The relative membership levels of the main political parties in Great Britain have remained similar for the last five years.

The Labour Party maintains its position as the party with the largest membership (432,000), followed by the Conservatives (172,000) and the SNP (104,000). Membership data for the Liberal Democrats is published more frequently and shows the party continuing as the fourth largest in Great Britain (74,000). The Green Party and Plaid Cymru have the smallest membership of political parties in Great Britain elected to the House of Commons.

In March 2023, the SNP provided an updated figure of 72,186 members.¹ The chart above has not been adjusted to reflect this as figures for the same point in time have not yet been obtained for the other parties.

Party membership as a percentage of the electorate



Notes: The figure for the SNP is calculated as a proportion of the electorate of Scotland. The figure for Plaid Cymru is calculated as a proportion of the electorate of Wales. The figure for the Green Party is calculated as a proportion of the electorate in England in Wales. All others are calculated as a proportion of the UK electoral population. Figures are calculated using population data from the year the membership data is from, or the nearest available.

Sources:

[Electoral Statistics for the UK, ONS](#), December 2021 and earlier editions.

Labour, Lib Dems, SNP: [Reports and Accounts, Electoral Commission](#), August 2022

[Liz Truss to be UK prime minister after winning Tory leadership race](#), Financial Times, 5 September 2022

Library correspondence with Plaid Cymru head office, August 2022

The SNP's membership is equivalent to around 3% of the Scottish population. For Plaid Cymru and Wales, the figure is 0.4%.

Out of parties that stand across the whole of Great Britain, Labour's members make up the largest proportion of the electorate (0.9%). This is followed by the Conservatives (0.4%).

The Greens have the lowest rate of membership amongst voters (0.1%), when looking at all parties in Great Britain that have MPs elected to the Commons.

¹ BBC, ['SNP says its membership has fallen to 72,000'](#), 16 March 2023

1 Trends in UK political party memberships

1.1 About the data

Political parties are under no official obligation to publish membership data. There is no agreed definition of ‘party membership’, nor any official body to monitor it. These three factors, together with continually evolving membership structures, mean the quality of available data varies between parties and over time.

Some parties restrict the voting rights of certain members, for example, while others offer gradations in membership to suit a member’s level of engagement with the party. It is technically possible for someone to be a member of multiple political parties.

There are four main source types for party membership data:

Figures cited in submissions to the Electoral Commission

Many parties provide party membership figures for the year ending 31 December in annual accounts submitted to the Electoral Commission. All parties are required to submit these accounts by the [Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act \(2000\)](#); however, they are not obliged to include membership data. When annual accounts do include these figures, they are probably the most reliable estimates available. The charts and tables throughout this paper use these figures wherever possible.

Data provided by party headquarters

Data provided on request from party head offices to the House of Commons Library is an alternative source of information. It is used for the latest estimates when possible.

Party press releases

Party press releases often provide the most up-to-date membership figures. However, they are not released regularly and can be inconsistent over time and between parties.

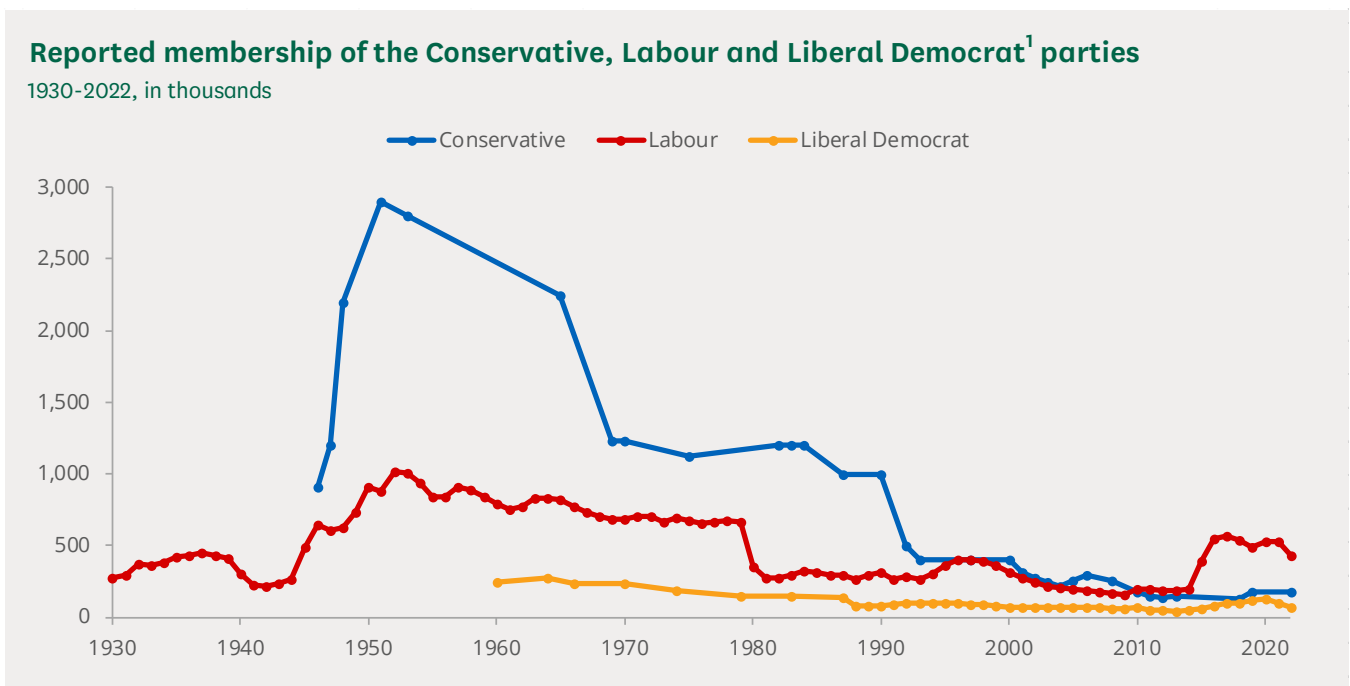
Media and academic estimates

Media and academic estimates can be used to supplement Electoral Commission submissions and party press releases.

In many cases historical data series are only rough estimates and may misrepresent membership. Conservative membership prior to 1993 could have been exaggerated and the same may have been the case for Labour membership up to the 1980s.² Now that political parties are required to publish their accounts, the figures (where given) are likely to be more reliable.

1.2 Historical trends: 1930-2022

As shown in the chart below, the membership of the Conservative Party has historically been above that of Labour, apart from a brief period around the 1997 General Election. However, since 2010, Labour's membership has been above that of the Conservatives.



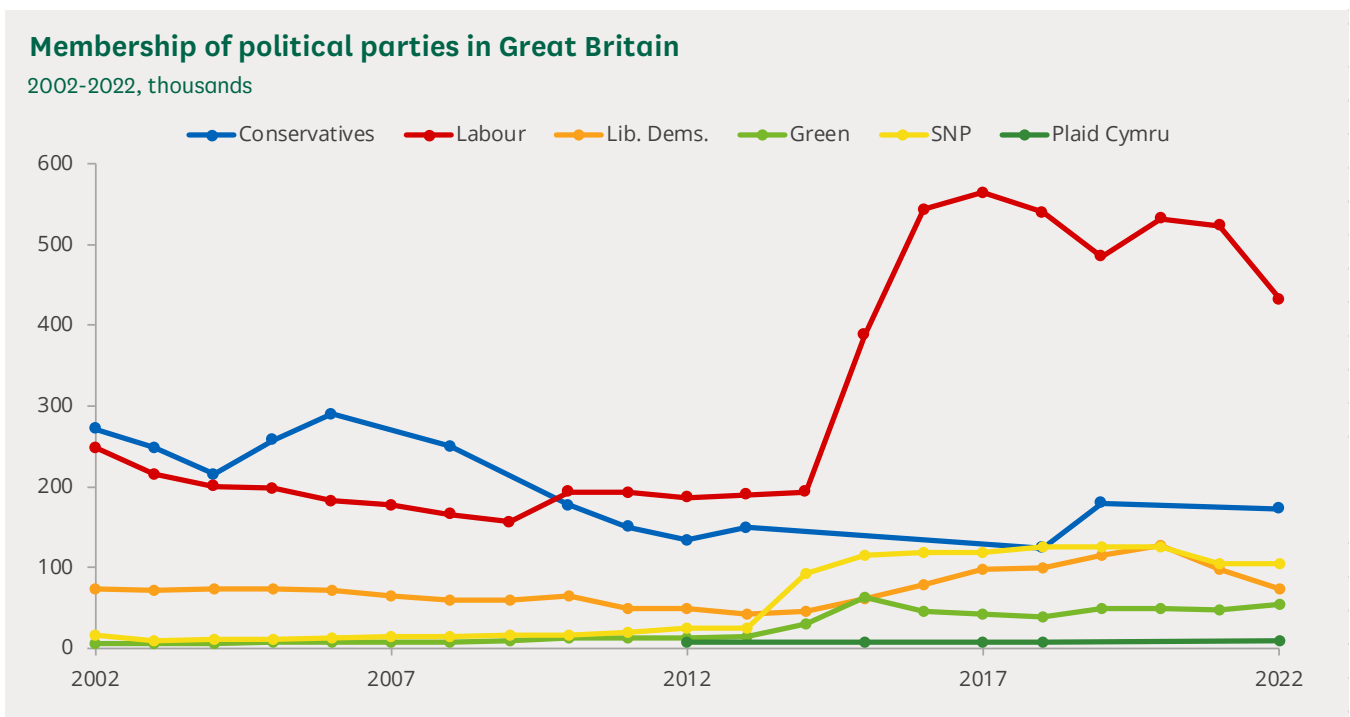
Note (1): Figures for the Liberal Democrats includes its antecedent parties, the Liberals and the SDP.

Sources: Butler D and Butler G, *British Political Facts*, 2011; Seyd P & Whiteley P, 'British Party Members: An Overview', *Party Politics*, 10:4 2004; Scarrow S, *Parties and their members: organising for victory in Britain and Germany* (1996); Conservative membership figures derive from 2002-2006 Daily Telegraph; 2008 News of the World estimate; 2010-2011 estimates reported by the Independent and Daily Mail 2013-2014; Lewis, B (@BrandonLewis). "Delighted that we have 180,000 @Conservatives members!" (Twitter). 4 July 2021 [accessed 30 August 2022]. Available from: <https://twitter.com/BrandonLewis/status/1146761109963255809>; Financial Times, *Liz Truss to be UK prime minister after winning Tory leadership race*, 5 September 2022; Party Annual Accounts submitted to the [Electoral Commission](#) when available.

² Butler D and Butler G, *British Political Facts*, 2010, p159; Seyd P and Whiteley P, "British Party Members: An Overview", *Party Politics*, 10:4, 2004, p356; Thorpe A, "Reconstructing Conservative Party Membership in World War II Britain", *Parliamentary Affairs*, 62:2, p227

Membership peaked for both the Conservatives and Labour in the early 1950s. In 1953 the Conservative Party had a reported membership of 2.8 million; in the same year, Labour claimed over a million members. However, these figures are academic estimates and subsequent studies suggest estimates for both parties were inflated.³ Changes in monitoring practices introduced in the late 1970s improved the quality of Labour Party estimates. Increased media and parliamentary attention encouraged improvements to Conservative Party estimates since the early 1990s.

The chart below shows trends from 2002 onwards.



Note: Labour party membership figures for 2015 and 2016 include party members and affiliated supporters but exclude registered supporters.

Sources:

Prior to 2016 (All parties excluding Conservative) figures derived from [party annual accounts](#) submitted to the Electoral Commission year ending 31 December;

2016 figures, for all parties except Conservative, are based on information provided by Parties' head offices and recent estimates in news articles as of 2018. Conservative membership figures derive from 2002-2006 Daily Telegraph; 2008 News of the World estimate; 2010-2011 estimates reported by the Independent and Daily Mail 2013-2014.

Lewis, B (@BrandonLewis). "Delighted that we have 180,000 @Conservatives members!" (Twitter). 4 July 2021 [accessed 30 August 2022]. Available from: <https://twitter.com/BrandonLewis/status/1146761109963255809>

[Liz Truss to be UK prime minister after winning Tory leadership race](#), Financial Times, 5 September 2022

Labour – [Daily Mirror/The Guardian](#), 5 February 2019; LabourList, '[Momentum celebrates hitting 40,000 members](#)', 9 April 2018; '[Labour membership dips below half a million as tens of thousands leave party](#)', Politics Home, 23 July 2019.

Liberal Democrats- Federal Board Member, [Twitter](#), 3 August 2019, Party Membership Officer, Tweets, July 2019

SNP figures from [Published Accounts to the Electoral Commission](#).

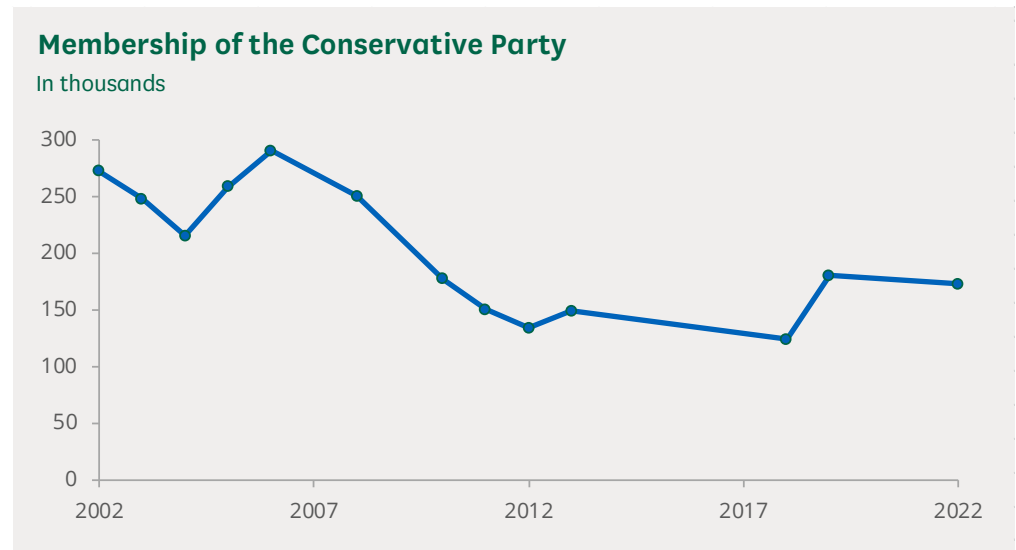
Information provided by Green Party Headquarters, July 2019.

³ Butler D and Butler G, British Political Facts, 2010, p159; Seyd P and Whiteley P, "British Party Members: An Overview", Party Politics, 10:4, 2004, p356; Thorpe A, "Reconstructing Conservative Party Membership in World War II Britain", Parliamentary Affairs, 62:2, p227

1.3

Membership trends by party

Conservative Party



Sources:

Whitely et al, True Blues: the politics of Conservative Party membership, 1994

Lewis, B (@BrandonLewis). "Delighted that we have 180,000 @Conservatives members!" (Twitter). 4 July 2021 [accessed 30 August 2022]. Available from: <https://twitter.com/BrandonLewis/status/1146761109963255809>; Lewis B, 'Picking a new Prime Minister is an important task', Daily Telegraph, 25 May 2019.

'Conservative Party membership has risen to 149,800 – up 11.7 per cent', Conservative Home, 28 September 2014.

'CCHQ declares Conservative Party membership to be 134,000', Conservative Home, 17 September 2013.

Shapps G, 'Yes, Party Membership will survive but it will change', Conservative Home, 18 September 2013.

'Tories swoop on 'unpatriotic' Jeremy Corbyn as membership SWELLS in Conservative Party', Daily Express, 18 March 2018.

Liz Truss to be UK prime minister after winning Tory leadership race, Financial Times, 5 September 2022

Historically, the Conservative Party has not produced systematic membership estimates, though in recent years the Conservative Campaign Headquarters (CCHQ) has done so infrequently. This reluctance to publish estimates could be due to the structure of the party and the process of individuals becoming full members.⁴ An alternative explanation (which can also be applied to other parties) is they do not want to disclose membership figures for political reasons.

The Conservative Party consists of three separate organisations:

- the National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations (responsible for constituency associations)
- the Conservative Campaign Headquarters (CCHQ) and
- the Conservative Parliamentary Party (run from the Whip's office).

⁴ Whitely P et al, True Blues: the politics of Conservative Party membership, 1994

The Court of Appeal confirmed this fragmentary nature in 1982.⁵

Individuals who joined their local Conservative association did not automatically become members of the National Union. The party claimed the fragmentary nature of membership records that resulted from this made it difficult to accurately estimate to overall membership.

Reported Conservative Party membership increased after the Second World War, from around 910,000 in 1946 to a reported record high of 2.8 million in 1953.⁶ The Conservatives had more individual members than any other party up to the mid-1990s, with about 400,000 members, though these figures are now believed to be an exaggeration.

In the 2022 Conservative Leadership election, there were 172,000 members.⁷ This figure is for all members who had joined by 3 June 2022.⁸ This was a decline of around 8,000 members since the last official estimate in 2019, when there were 180,000 members.⁹

The previous official estimates of membership were 124,000 in 2018 and 149,800 in December 2013.¹⁰ The Conservative Party membership fell by more than half from 273,000 to 134,000 between 2002 and 2013, although the decline was temporarily reversed in the mid-2000s.¹¹

In September 2012, former Conservative Party Co-Chairman, Grant Shapps, announced the creation of Conservative Party ‘Friends’.¹² Subsequently, CCHQ has released membership estimates that, in addition to persons regarded as members in the traditional sense, “also tallies a larger figure for the wider party ...including donors, activists and others who play a supportive part but do not pay membership fees”.¹³

In September 2014, Conservative Home reported this wider estimate to be 224,000.¹⁴ In April 2018, the then Chairman of the Conservative Party,

⁵ [Conservative and Unionist Central Office v James Robert Samuel Burrell](#) (HM Inspector of Taxes) [1981] EWCA Civ 2

⁶ Butler D and Butler G, *British Political Facts*, 2011; Seyd P & Whiteley P, ‘British Party Members: An Overview’, *Party Politics*, 10:4 (2004)

⁷ [Liz Truss to be UK prime minister after winning Tory leadership race](#), *Financial Times*, 5 September 2022

⁸ [Leadership Election FAQs](#), *Conservatives* [accessed 5 September 2022]

⁹ Lewis, B (@BrandonLewis). “Delighted that we have 180,000 @Conservatives members!” (Twitter). 4 July 2021 [accessed 30 August 2022]. Available from:

<https://twitter.com/BrandonLewis/status/1146761109963255809>

¹⁰ [‘Conservative Party membership has risen to 149,800 – up 11.7 per cent’](#), *Conservative Home*, 28 September 2014

¹¹ [‘CCHQ declares Conservative Party membership to be 134,000’](#), *Conservative Home*, 17 September 2013

¹² Shapps G, [‘Yes, Party Membership will survive but it will change’](#), *Conservative Home*, 18 September 2013

¹³ [‘Conservative Party membership has risen to 149,800 – up 11.7 per cent’](#), *Conservative Home*, 28 September 2014

¹⁴ [‘Conservative Party membership has risen to 149,800 – up 11.7 per cent’](#), *Conservative Home*, 28 September 2014

Brandon Lewis, suggested if activists were included, the wider Conservative membership was 500,000.¹⁵

Labour Party



Sources:

Butler D and Butler G, *British Political Facts*, 2011

Electoral Commission, [reports and accounts](#) for various years

The Labour Party has published figures on individual membership since 1928. Until 2004, figures were available in the annual Conference Report published by the Party's National Executive Committee, and total membership is currently recorded in Labour's financial statements.¹⁶

Labour doubled its membership between 1928 and 1937. Membership reduced significantly during the Second World War but rose sharply in the immediate post-war period. In 1952 and 1953, the Party claimed over one million members, though this is now believed to be an exaggeration.

Reported membership fell from 666,000 to 348,000 between 1979 and 1980, but the large decrease was probably due to a change in reporting standards and suggests Labour's actual membership before 1980 was likely exaggerated. From 1956, constituency Labour Parties were forced to record a minimum membership of 800, which likely inflated the national total.¹⁷

Membership remained constant throughout the 1980s before climbing in the mid-1990s following a recruitment drive. There was a fall in membership during Labour's time in office between 1997 and 2009, but it increased again in 2010.

¹⁵ 'Tories swoop on 'unpatriotic' Jeremy Corbyn as membership SWELLS in Conservative Party', Daily Express, 18 March 2018

¹⁶ Electoral Commission, [reports and accounts](#) for various years

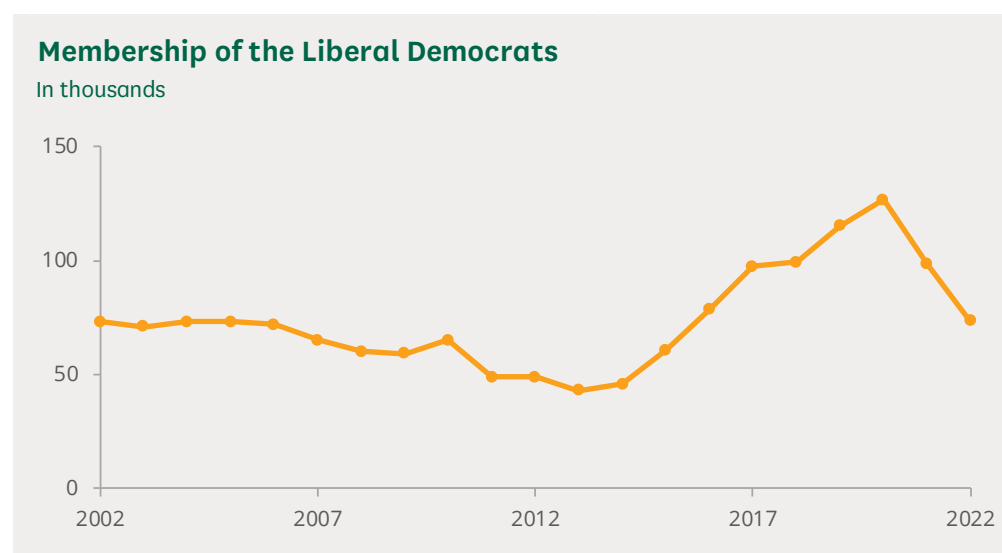
¹⁷ Thorpe A, 'Reconstructing Conservative Party Membership in World War II Britain', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 62: 2 (2009), 227

Party membership rose immediately following the 2015 General Election. 422,664 people voted in the September 2015 leadership contest, 59.5% of which voted for Jeremy Corbyn.¹⁸ In December 2015, the Labour Party had 388,000 members.¹⁹

In April 2018, an article published on Labour List stated Labour had around 540,000 members.²⁰ According to press reports, Labour membership stood in the region of 512,000 in February 2019, and fell to 485,000 by August 2019.²¹ Some press sources indicated Labour membership peaked at 575,000 in July 2017.²² The Guardian reported the Party said the fall in membership in early 2019 was the result of members being in arrears, rather than an absolute fall.²³ Reports and accounts published by the Electoral Commission in August 2022 indicate the Party had 432,213 members at the end of 2021.

Section 4 provides more detail on the broader membership of the Labour movement, including estimates of registered and affiliated supporters.

Liberal Democrats



Source: Electoral Commission, [reports and accounts](#) for various years

¹⁸ Labour Party press release, '[Results of the Labour Leadership elections](#)', 12 September 2015

¹⁹ Electoral Commission, 2015 [Labour Party annual accounts](#).

²⁰ LabourList, '[Momentum celebrates hitting 40,000 members](#)', 9 April 2018

²¹ '[Labour Party membership has dropped reveals leaked data](#)', Daily Mirror, 5 February 2019; '[Labour membership falls 10%](#)', The Guardian, 5 February 2019; '[Labour membership dips below half a million as tens of thousands leave party](#)', Politics Home, 23 July 2019.

²² '[Getting Candidates in Place](#)', Labourlist, 20 July 2017; Lucy Fisher (@LOS_Fisher). "NEW: Labour membership surge continues, reaching 575,474 members, up from 552,000 after election, according to NEC source." (Twitter). 18 July 2017 [Accessed 31/08/2022] Available from: https://twitter.com/LOS_Fisher/status/887274758789791744?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fesrcpartyproject.org%2Fpmp-related-news-2%2Fmembership-numbers%2F&tfw_site=wordpressdotcom

²³ '[Labour membership falls 10%](#)', The Guardian, 5 February 2019.

Since the creation of the Liberal Democrats in 1988, membership data has been available from the Party's internal leadership and presidential elections and more recently from its annual accounts.

Academics Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley estimate the previous Liberal Party had over 243,000 members in 1960.²⁴ They estimate the combined membership of the Liberal Party and the Social Democratic Party to have been approximately 145,000 in 1983 and 138,000 in 1987.²⁵

In 1988 the newly created Liberal Democrat Party reported its membership to be around 80,000. The Party claimed about 100,000 members in the early 1990s, falling to around 70,000 in the early 2000s.

Membership fell sharply after the 2010 General Election, from 65,000 in 2010 to about 49,000 in 2011. In April 2014, the Party claimed 44,000 members.²⁶ Around 14,000 new members joined in the two weeks since the 2017 General Election was called.²⁷ A further 20,000 joined since the local elections in May 2019.²⁸

There were 107,000 members in July 2019.²⁹ This was an increase from 95,000 reported in the Party's annual accounts in December 2018.³⁰ Recent data submitted to the Electoral Commission suggests the party has 73,544 members as of the end of 2021.

²⁴ Whiteley P and Seyd P, *High-Intensity Participation: The Dynamics of Party Activism in Britain 2002*, p. 10

²⁵ Seyd P and Whiteley P, '[British Party Members: An Overview](#)', *Party Politics*, 2004, 10:4, p 357

²⁶ Liberal Democrat Press Releases, '[Lib Dem membership surge continues](#)', 2 April 2014

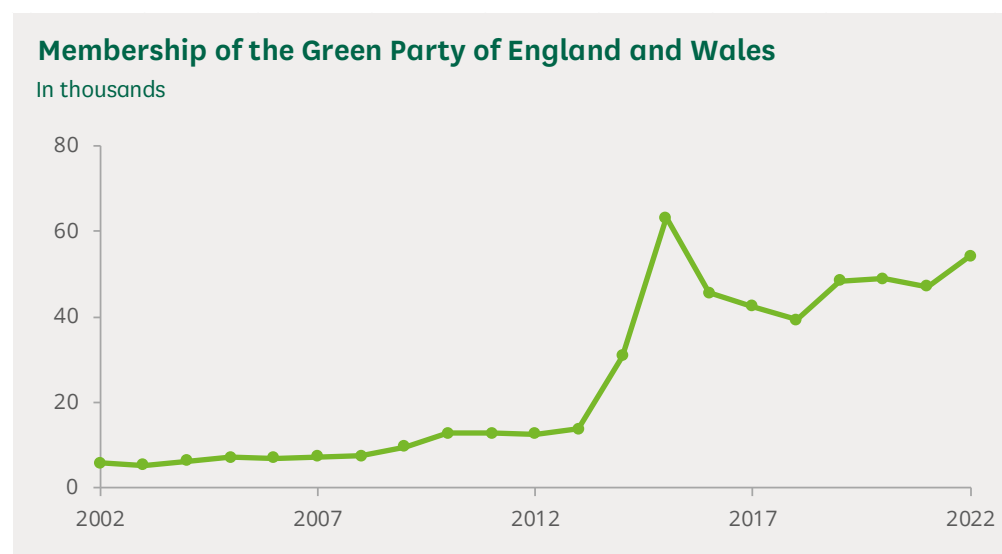
²⁷ '[Liberal Democrats hit highest ever membership on eve of local elections](#)', *Liberal Democrats*, 3 May 2017.

²⁸ Liberal Democrat Media Office (@LibDemPress) "Whoop! @vincecable celebrates our record ever levels of party membership". 8 June 2019 [accessed 31 August 2022]. Available from: <https://twitter.com/LibDemPress/status/1137277070105559040>

²⁹ Liberal Democrat Media Office (@LibDemPress) "Whoop! @vincecable celebrates our record ever levels of party membership". 8 June 2019 [accessed 31 August 2022]. Available from: <https://twitter.com/LibDemPress/status/1137277070105559040>; Davey E, '[My reflections from the campaign trail](#)', *Liberal Democrat Voice*, 16 July 2019; Dyer W (@WilliamPHDyer), BREAKING: Over 1,000 new @LibDems joiners since @DoddsJane was elected! Bringing the total membership to over 115,000. #SwinsonSurge #BreconByelection #LibDemSurge". 3 August 2019 [accessed 31 August 2022]. Available from: <https://twitter.com/WilliamPHDyer/status/1157558142143803392> , Foster G (@CatDadGreg), "Also, lastly, the #SwinsonSurge is still trucking away - 600 more people joined today taking the total since Monday over 8,000. Come along and join the team, stop Brexit, sack Boris Johnson & make Jo the next Prime Minister: <http://libdems.org.uk/join>". 26 July 2019 [accessed 31 August 2022]. Available from: <https://twitter.com/CatDadGreg/status/1154830932601376773>.

³⁰ Electoral Commission, '[Liberal Democrat Party Annual Accounts for 2018](#)'

Green Party



Source:

Electoral Commission, [reports and accounts](#) for various years

Library correspondence with Green Party Head Office, July 2019.

Charts and tables throughout this paper refer to the membership of the Green Party (England and Wales) only, as opposed to a combined ‘UK Green Parties’ total, as the Green Party (England and Wales), the Scottish Green Party and the Green Party in Northern Ireland are each separately registered with the Electoral Commission. The Scottish Green Party had 7,500 members in 2021.³¹

Most recent data from the Electoral Commission suggests the Green Party of England and Wales had a membership of 54,306 at the end of December 2021. Based on data provided by the Green Party headquarters, Party membership was 48,500 in July 2019.³² This was an increase from the 39,350 members reported by Party headquarters in August 2018.

The Green Party reached its highest number of recorded members in December 2015. According to submissions to the Electoral Commission, the Green Party had 63,000 members.³³

Membership remained at approximately 5,000 members between 1998 and 2002. It increased to just over 7,000 members between 2005 and 2008 and rose again to 9,600 in 2009 and to 12,800 in 2010 (the year in which the party won its first parliamentary seat, Brighton Pavilion, which it still holds).

Across the UK, Green Party press releases claimed roughly 70,000 people are members of the ‘combined UK Green Parties’ in 2015.³⁴

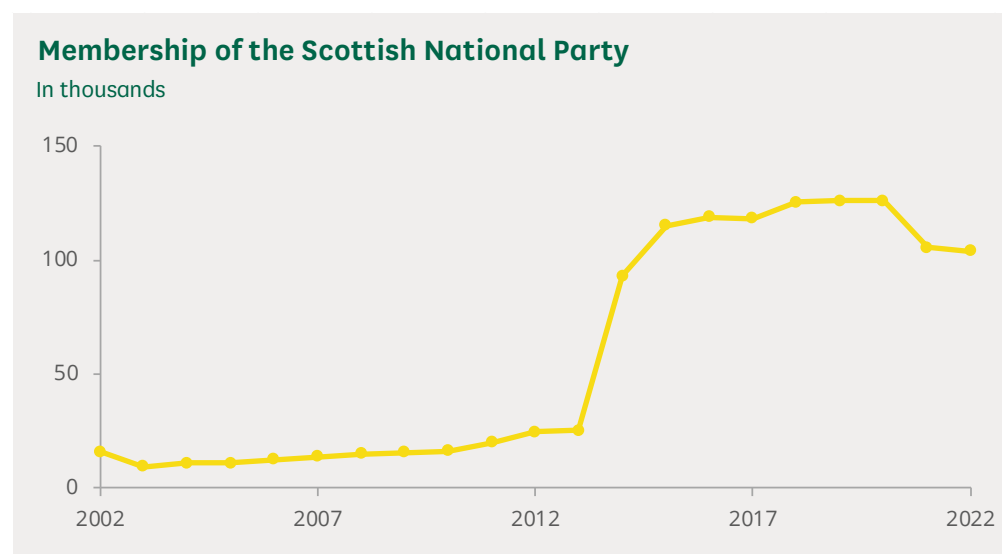
³¹ The Guardian, [Deal between Scottish Greens and SNP delayed as deadline looms](#), 11 August 2021

³² Library correspondence with Green Party Head Office, July 2019

³³ Electoral Commission, [Green Party accounts 2015](#)

³⁴ Green Party, [‘More Members than the Germans: UK Green parties hit 70,000’](#), 26 April 2015

Scottish National Party



Source: Electoral Commission, [reports and accounts](#) for various years

Having recorded 16,000 members in 2002, membership of the Scottish National Party (SNP) fell to 9,500 members in 2003. Membership rose to around 16,000 members in 2010.

Following the Scottish Independence Referendum in 2014, the SNP experienced a rapid rise in membership. On 23 September 2014, the Party claimed its membership was on course to double its pre-referendum total.³⁵ On 10 October 2014, membership reached 80,000.³⁶ According to the Electoral Commission, as of 31 December 2015, the Party had around 115,000 members.³⁷ The SNP membership figures published by the Electoral Commission suggest there were 118,162 members as of December 2017.

Figures published by the Electoral Commission in August 2022 suggest the Party had 103,884 members at the end of December 2021.

In March 2023, the BBC reported that the SNP had provided candidates in its leadership contest with an updated membership figure of 72,186 members, the lowest figure in ten years.³⁸

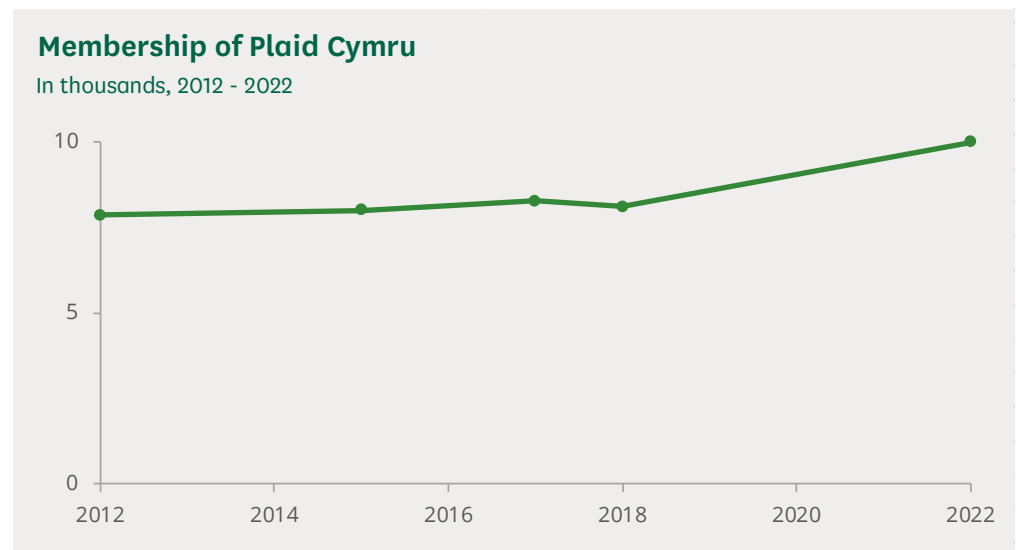
³⁵ Scottish National Party press release, '[SNP on course to double membership](#)', 23 September 2014

³⁶ The Scotsman, '[SNP membership reaches 80,000](#)', 10 October 2014

³⁷ Electoral Commission, [Scottish National Party accounts 2015](#)

³⁸ BBC, '[SNP says its membership has fallen to 72,000](#)', 16 March 2023

Plaid Cymru



Source:

Plaid Cymru, '[Plaid Cymru sees membership boost](#)' (12 October 2018)

Daily Express, '[Plaid Cymru Party Profile](#)', 2017 (reported figure 8,273 as at 2017)

Library correspondence with Plaid Cymru's Head Office, 2 August 2016

Plaid Cymru, '[Plaid publishes report to move the Party of Wales forward](#)', 17 January 2012

Plaid Cymru has around 10,000 members as of August 2022. This figure was obtained by a telephone conversation with the Party's head office. This was a rise from 8,000 members reported in April 2018.³⁹

The Daily Express reported 8,273 members in 2017.⁴⁰ This was a slight increase from 8,015 in December 2015.⁴¹ In January 2012, the Guardian reported the party's membership as 7,863.⁴²

Reform UK

The Brexit Party was launched by Nigel Farage in April 2019 to contest in that year's European elections.⁴³ Following Britain's exit from the European Union, the Party was relaunched as Reform UK. Reform UK does not publish information on the number of members. As the Brexit Party, it claimed 115,000 supporters (not members) in June 2019.⁴⁴

³⁹ Plaid Cymru, '[Plaid Cymru sees membership boost](#)', 12 October 2018

⁴⁰ Daily Express, '[Plaid Cymru Party Profile](#)', 2017 (reported figure 8,273 as at 2017)

⁴¹ Library correspondence with Plaid Cymru's Head Office, 2 August 2016

⁴² Plaid Cymru, '[Plaid publishes report to move the Party of Wales forward](#)', 17 January 2012

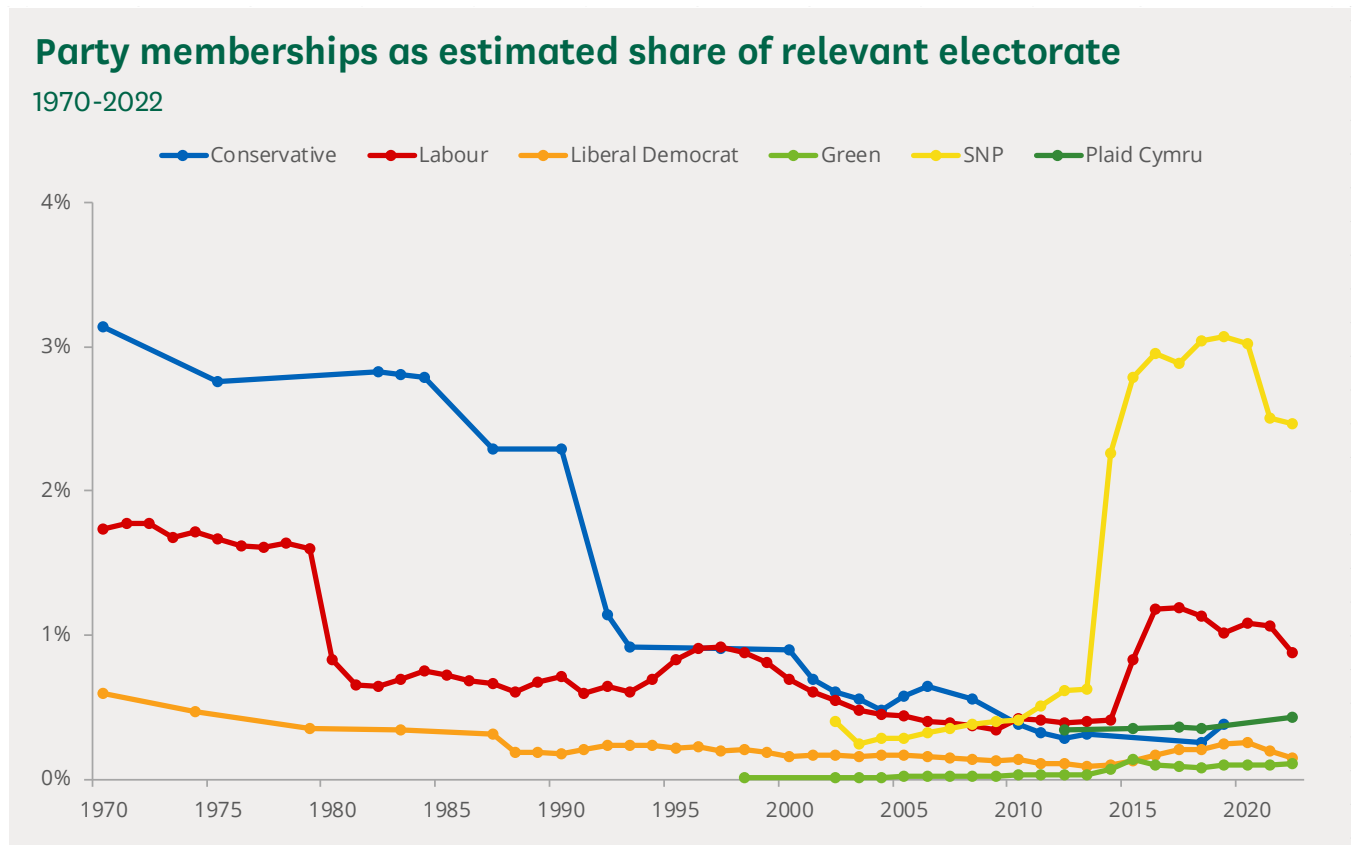
⁴³ BBC News, '[Nigel Farage launches Brexit Party ahead of European elections](#)', 12 April 2019

⁴⁴ Sky News, '[Brexit Party reveals 100 'new politics' MP candidates](#)', 30 June 2019

2

Membership as a proportion of the electorate

This chart below shows the membership of the main political parties in Great Britain as a proportion of the overall electorate in the area they stand candidates in.



Notes: The figures for the SNP is calculated as a proportion of the electoral population of Scotland. The figures for Plaid Cymru are a calculated as a proportion of the electoral population of Wales. The figures for the Green Party are calculated as a proportion of the electoral population of England and Wales. This is with the exception of the Green Party figure from 1998, which is calculated as a proportion of the UK electoral population, due to a lack of data available by country pre-2000. All others are calculated as a proportion of the UK electoral population. Figures are calculated using population data from the year the membership data is from, or the closest available.

Sources:
[Electoral Statistics for the UK, ONS](#), December 2021 and earlier editions
As earlier charts

The most recent data indicates around 1.5% of the UK population are members of one of the Liberal Democrats, Labour Party or Conservative Party, though latest data for the Conservative Party is from 2019. This compares to a historic low of 0.8% in 2013. Across the UK, the Labour Party's membership increased from 0.4% of the electorate in 2013 to 1.2% in 2017, before falling to 0.9% in April 2022.

Across Scotland, assuming all Scottish National Party members reside in Scotland, membership increased from 0.6% of the electorate in 2013 to 2.8% in 2017 and 2018. This figure then fell to 2.5% in 2022.

In Wales, around 0.4% of the electorate is a member of Plaid Cymru as of August 2022.

Calculating party membership as a proportion of the electorate is based on the assumption that the latest figures are accurately reported by party head offices and the media.

3

Broader membership of the Labour movement

The relationship between trade unions and the Labour Party has changed in recent years. There are currently two tiers of Labour membership:

Party members: Individual members pay an annual fee, can attend conference and constituency meetings, are able to represent the Party and, if eligible, vote in party elections (such as selection of party representatives, mayor candidates and leader).

Affiliated supporters: Affiliated supporters are members of an affiliate (levy paying) trade union or another organisation, full lists of which are available online.⁴⁵ They are entitled to attend all constituency Labour Party member meetings and to attend Conference as visitors; they can vote in leadership, deputy leadership and mayoral elections. Affiliated supporters cannot represent the Party, nor can they vote on the selection of party representatives.⁴⁶

Until 2021, Labour also had registered supporters, under a scheme created in 2010.⁴⁷ At the time, registered supporters paid a £3 fee, and they have the right to vote in leadership, deputy leadership and London mayoral elections. As of August 2016, the fee for registered supporters was £25.⁴⁸ The Registered Supporters Scheme was abolished in 2021 and as such, only full and affiliated members can vote in future Labour leadership elections.⁴⁹

In the 2016 leadership election, Jeremy Corbyn was re-elected with 61.1% of the vote. 506,438 people voted, of which 285,176 were members, 121,527 were registered supporters and 99,745 were affiliated supporters.⁵⁰

In the 2020 leadership election, Sir Keir Starmer was elected with 56.2% of the vote. 490,731 people voted, of which 401,564 were members, 76,161 were affiliated supporters and 13,006 were registered supporters.⁵¹ In 2021, this tier of affiliated supporters was abolished and these individuals would have to

⁴⁵ For a full list of Labour's affiliated Trade Unions, see the [Trade Union and Labour Party Liaison Organisation](#). For a full list of Labour's affiliated socialist societies, see the Party's [website](#)

⁴⁶ Collins R, 'The Collins Review into Labour Party Reform', February 2014, 23

⁴⁷ Hain H, [Refounding Labour to win: a party for the new generation](#) (2010), 15

⁴⁸ 'Surge of registered supporters for leadership vote tops 180,000 in 48 hours', LabourList, 21 July 2016

⁴⁹ 'Andy Burnham 'Absolutely Happy' Labour Ditched Registered Supporters', Huffington Post, 27 September 2021

⁵⁰ Labour Party, [Labour Leadership Election 2016 Results](#)

⁵¹ Labour, [Leadership and Deputy Leadership election 2020 - Results](#), accessed 19 August 2022

join as full or affiliated members in order to vote in a future leadership election.

The broader Labour movement is comprised of members of affiliated trade unions (ATUs) and the Socialist and Cooperative societies, along with official Party members (members of constituency Labour parties). Prior to the reforms of 2014, ATUs held half of the votes at the Labour Party Conference. In 2011, the Party received £8.0 million from these affiliated groups compared with membership income of £5.2 million.

Until 1992, the Labour Party Conference Report included membership figures for the ATUs and the Socialist and Cooperative (Soc&Coop) societies.

ATU membership rose rapidly in the years immediately following the Second World War. It peaked at 6.5 million in 1979 but then fell steadily over the 1980s. In 1992, ATU membership was 4.6 million.⁵²

Individual party membership also increased in the immediate post-war period. In 1952, there were 1 million reported individual party members, representing about one-sixth of broad Labour membership. The sudden decline in individual members as a proportion of broad membership after 1979 is attributable to the likely inflation of membership figures before 1980.

Momentum

Momentum is a grassroots campaigning network which evolved out of Jeremy Corbyn's 2015 election campaign. According to Labour List, it had over 100,000 members in August 2021.⁵³ In April 2018, it had over 40,000 members, a number also claimed in May 2019, when it had 180 local groups.⁵⁴ The organisation says:

Momentum supports the Labour party, and works to increase participation and engagement in the party to enable it to win elections and enter Government.⁵⁵

⁵² Butler D and Butler G, *British Political Facts*, 2011

⁵³ [‘Momentum to expand base by engaging non-members – but is there a risk?’](#), Labour List, 9 August 2021

⁵⁴ [‘Momentum celebrates hitting 40,000 members’](#), Labour List, 9 April 2018; [‘Momentum urges Labour to adopt “radical” pledges’](#), The Guardian, 16 May 2019; Momentum, [‘Have your say’](#) [accessed 15 July 2019]

⁵⁵ Momentum website, [‘About Momentum’](#), [accessed 31 August 2017]

4 Characteristics of party members and supporters

In 2017, the average ages for party members of the Conservatives, Labour, SNP and Liberal Democrats ranged between 52 and 57; representation from minority ethnic groups was low, ranging between 3% and 4%. Identification with political parties fell to a historic low in 2012, according to the British Social Attitudes Survey, but has since risen to its highest level since 1987.⁵⁶

This section uses academic studies to examine the social characteristics of party members and supporters. Each study cited below follows a unique series of assumptions and methods, so caution should be taken when making comparisons between each source.

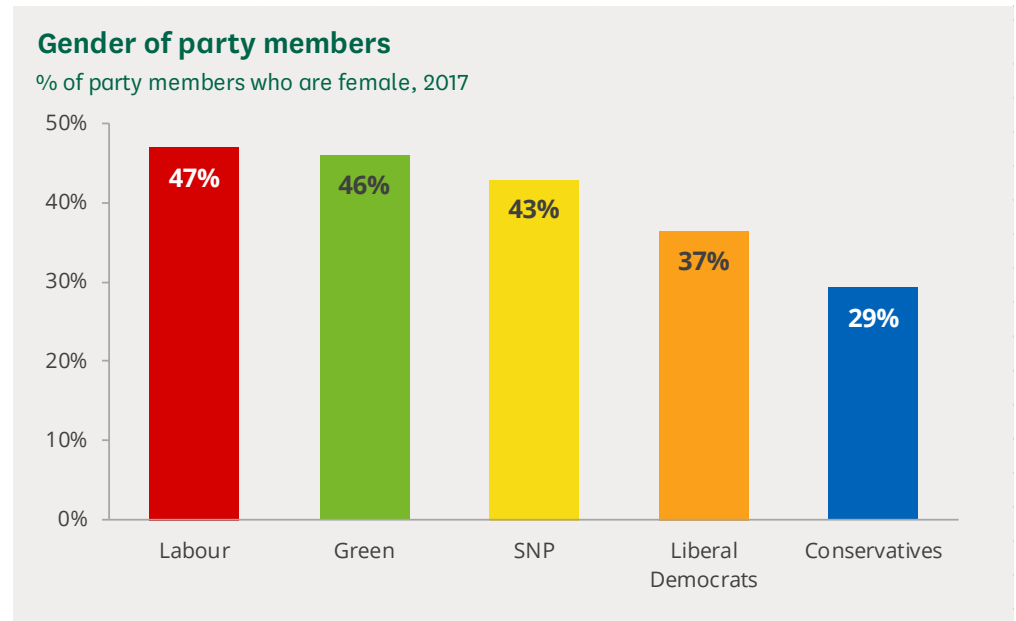
4.1 Social composition of party membership

This section uses [Party Membership Project](#) data. This project is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and run by Tim Bale, Paul Webb and Monica Poletti - academics from Queen Mary University of London and University of Sussex.

In January 2018, Queen Mary's University of London's Mile End Institute published the [Grassroots: Britain's party members: who they are, what they think, and what they do](#) report, based on the YouGov survey data of over 5,000 party members across the UK. This report provides information on the demographic and ideological differences between Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, and SNP party members. This section includes additional Party Membership Project data made available to the House of Commons Library for the Green Party.

⁵⁶ Nuffield Trust, [Party identification breakdown for the 2017 British Social Attitudes survey](#), 28 February 2018

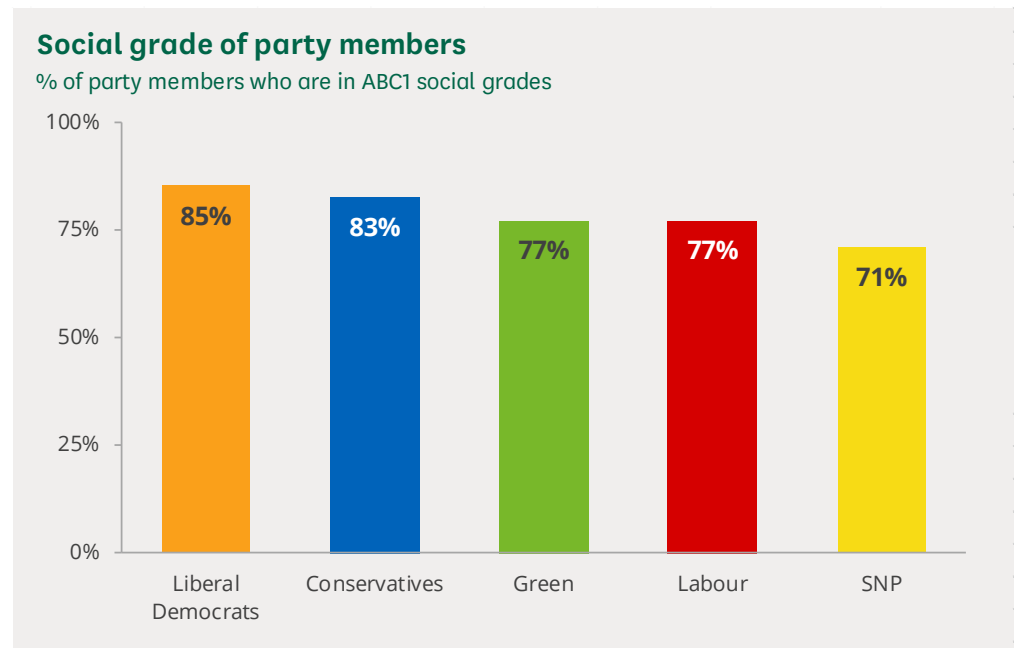
Gender of party members



Source: Bale et al, [Grassroots: Britain's party members: who they are, what they think, and what they do](#). ESRC-funded Party Members Project, 2018, p. 7.

In 2017, almost half of all Labour (47%) and Green Parties (46%) members were women. This proportion was lower among other parties: 43% of the SNP, 37% of the Lib Dems, and 29% of the Conservative membership are women.

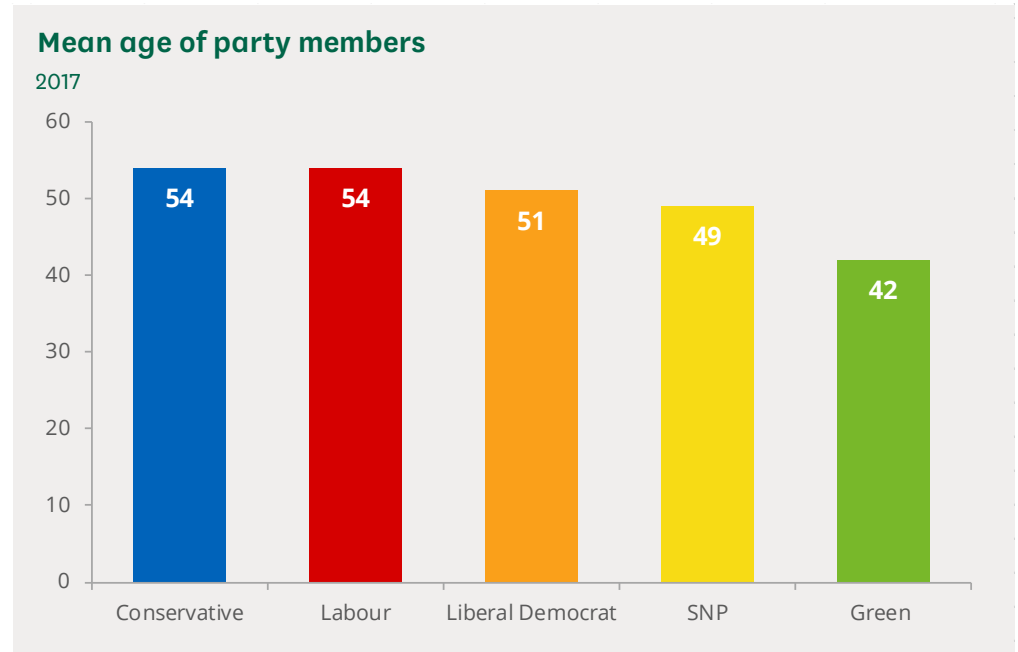
Party members by social grade



Source: Bale et al, [Grassroots: Britain's party members: who they are, what they think, and what they do](#). ESRC-funded Party Members Project, 2018, p. 7.

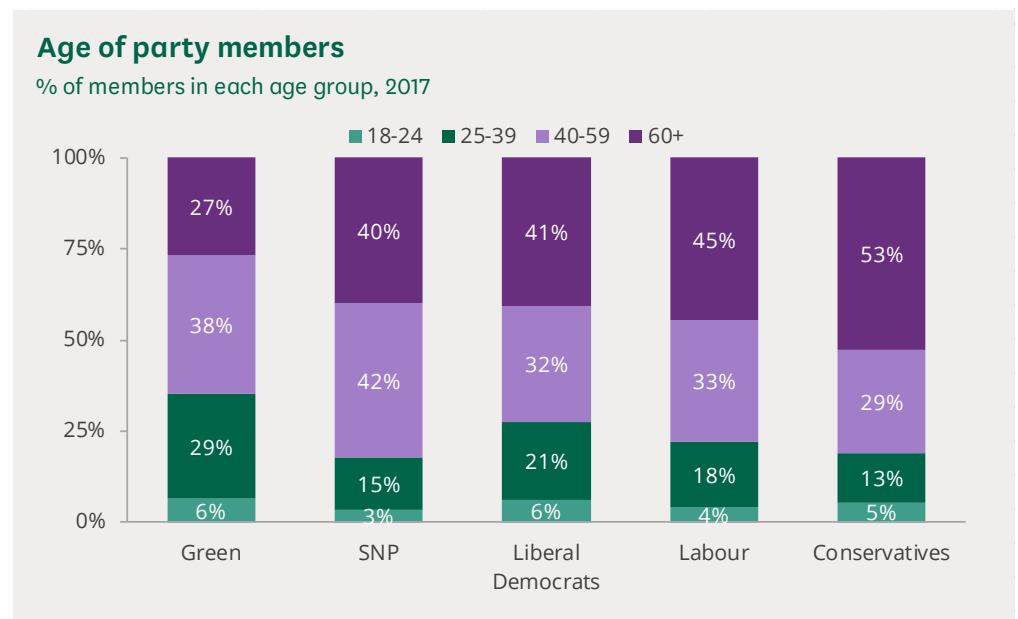
A majority of all party members belonged to a higher social class (ABC1), ranging from 85% of the Lib Dems to 71% of SNP members.

Age of party members



Source: Bale et al, [Grassroots: Britain's party members: who they are, what they think, and what they do. \(PDF\)](#), ESRC-funded Party Members Project, 2018, p. 9.

In 2017, the average age of Conservative Party members was 54, Labour 54, Lib Dems 51 and SNP 49.

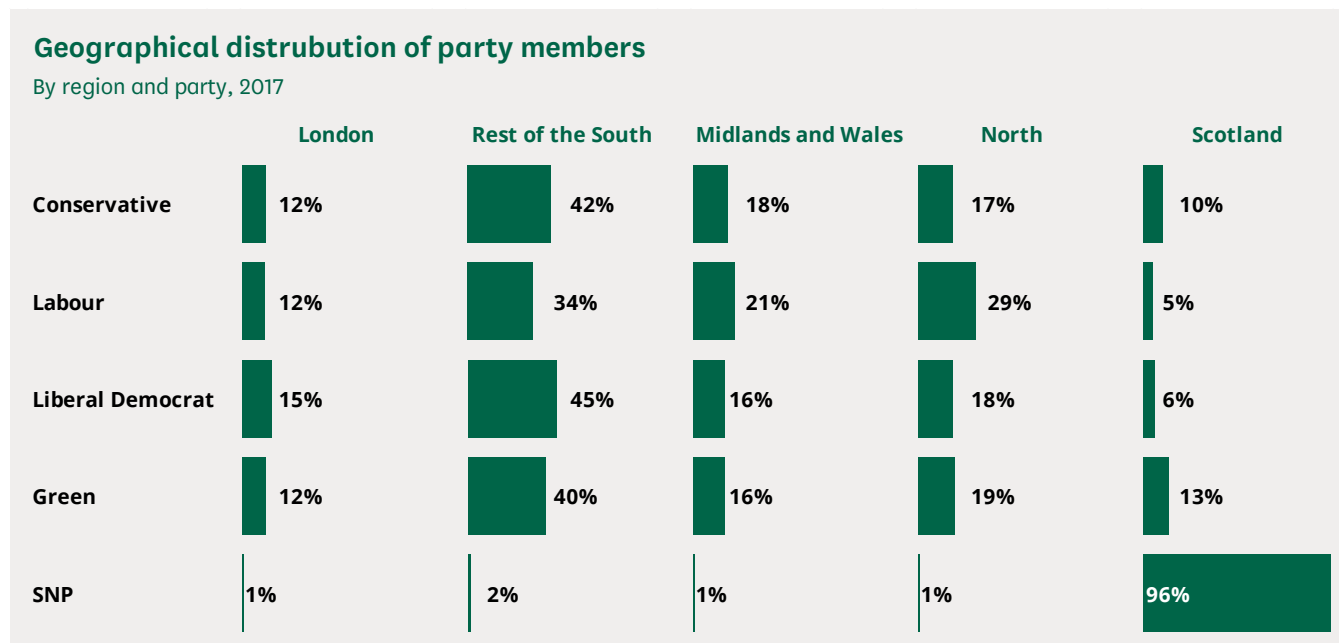


Source: Bale et al, [Grassroots: Britain's party members: who they are, what they think, and what they do. \(PDF\)](#), ESRC-funded Party Members Project, 2018, p. 9.

More than half of the Conservatives (53%) were also over 60-years-old compared to fewer than one-third (27%) of the Green Parties' members.

18-24-year-olds made up a similar proportion of Liberal Democrats, Greens and Conservatives, ranging from between 5% and 6%. The SNP had a smallest share of 18-24 year olds (3%).

Party membership by area



Source: Bale et al, [Grassroots: Britain's party members: who they are, what they think, and what they do.](#) (PDF), ESRC-funded Party Members Project, 2018, p. 9.

Data suggests that 96% of SNP members lived in Scotland in 2017. This Party had around 1-2% of members in other areas shown in the figure below.

Excluding the SNP, the largest share of all party members were in the South of England (outside London). 45% of Liberal Democrats lived in the South, followed by 42% of Conservatives, 40% Green, 32% Labour and just 2% of SNP members.

In contrast, the smallest share of the Conservative (10%), Liberal Democrats (6%) and Labour (5%) members lived in Scotland, compared to other four areas listed below.

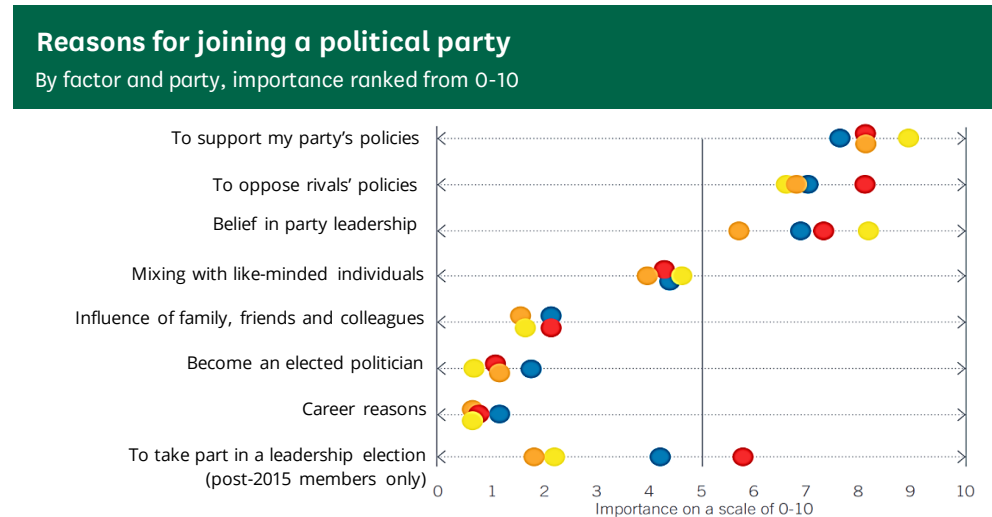
The Liberal Democrat Party had around 15% of its members in London area, followed by 12% of Labour, Greens and Conservatives members. Just 1% of SNP members lived in London in 2017.

Around one-fifth (21%) of Labour and UKIP members were from Midlands or Wales, followed by 18% Conservatives and 16% of Liberal Democrats and Greens. Labour had just under one third of its members in the North of

England, followed by 17-19% of Greens, Liberal Democrats and Conservative members.

4.2

Reasons for party membership



Notes: blue = Conservatives, red = Labour, yellow = SNP, orange = Lib Dems. Chart adapted from the publication cited below.

Source: Bale et al, [Grassroots: Britain's party members: who they are, what they think, and what they do](#). (PDF), ESRC-funded Party Members Project, 2018, p. 21

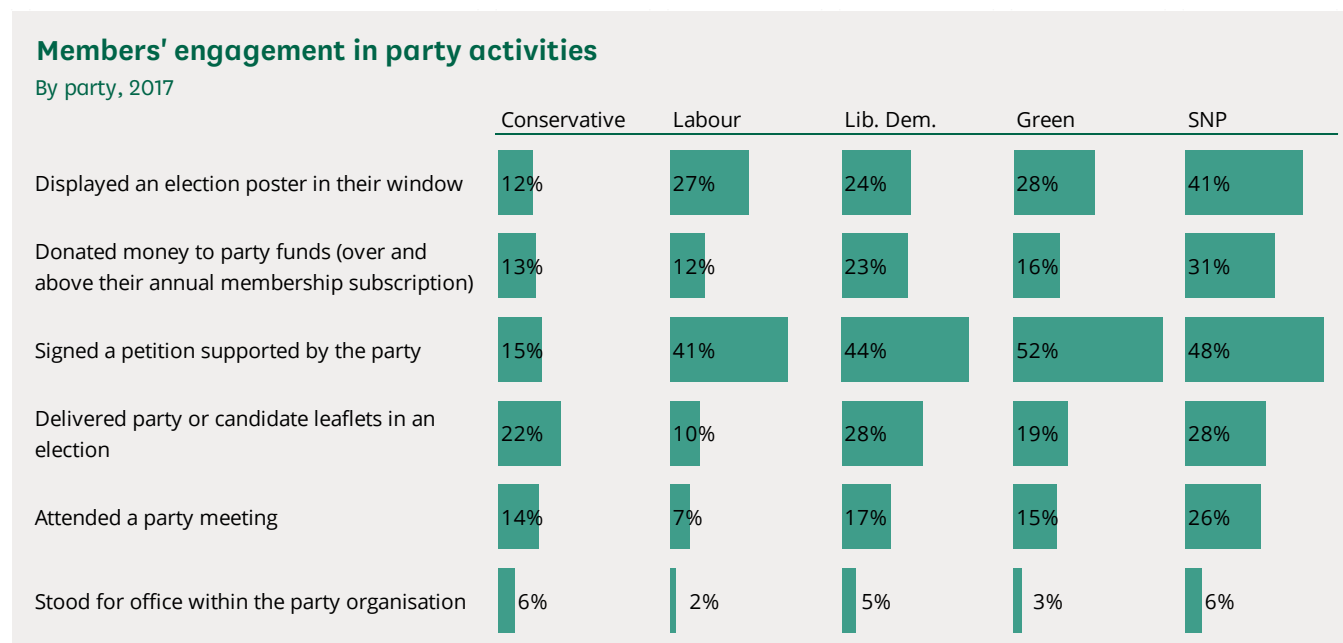
Members had varying reasons for joining their respective party. SNP members were most likely to join to support party policies. Labour members were (in 2017) most likely to join to participate in a leadership election. Members of all parties were least likely to join to advance their career or become a politician. On average, the most popular reason to join was to support party policies.

Among the benefits of being a party member, over 80% of all those surveyed agreed that party members can change the community or country. And over 60% of members agreed that getting active was a good way to meet interesting people. However, members across all parties also agreed that a downside of membership was that party activism often takes time away from one's family (Liberal Democrats 64%, Conservatives 60%, Labour 55%, SNP 50%).

It should be noted that the motivations for joining political parties could have changed over time and that these may not have been the reasons given when party membership generally was higher during the mid-20th Century.

4.3

Members' engagement with their party



Source: Bale et al, [Grassroots: Britain's party members: who they are, what they think, and what they do](#), (PDF), ESRC-funded Party Members Project, 2018, p. 37

Engagement in party related activities varies. The chart above represents the proportion of party members who frequently or occasionally engaged with their political party in selected ways in the five years up to 2017.

26% of SNP members had at least occasionally attended a party meeting. Around a third (34%-36%) of Liberal Democrats, Greens and the Conservatives have done the same, compared to 23% of Labour members.

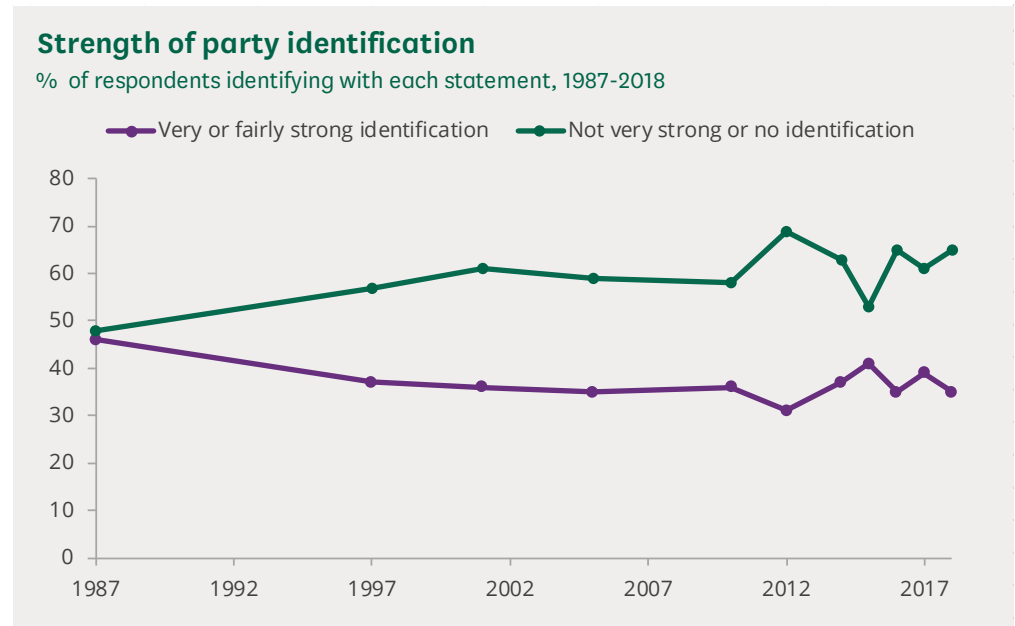
Compared with other parties, the SNP had the highest share of members (41%) who displayed an election poster in their window; in contrast just 12% of the Conservatives.

31% of SNP members have donated money to party funds, compared to 28% of Greens and just 12% of Conservative members.

52% of Greens had signed a petition supported by the party, compared to 15% of Conservatives.

4.4

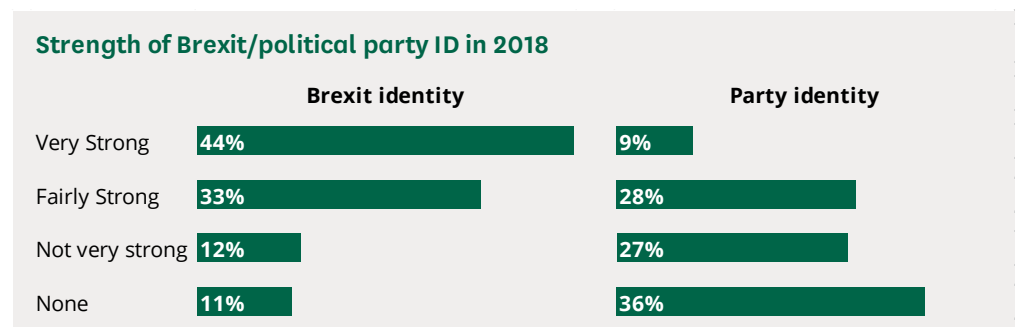
Identification and affiliation with political parties



Source: [British Social Attitudes Survey 36: The EU debate](#), 2019, p18

Successive British Social Attitude (BSA) surveys suggest that identification with political parties fell between 1987 and 2012, before rising slightly in 2015. In 1987, the proportion of the public who identified with a political party ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ strongly was 46%, compared to 31% in 2012. Over the same period the proportion who felt no or not very strong identification with a political party rose from 48% in 1987 to 69% in 2012, before falling to 65% in 2018.

Looking at age, 43% of those aged 65+ in 2018 had a ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ strong party identification, compared to 30-35% for all other age groups.⁵⁷



Source: Curtice J, [‘The emotional legacy of Brexit: how Britain has become a country of “remainers and leavers”’](#), 2018, p8

⁵⁷ [British Social Attitudes Survey 36 The EU debate](#), 2019, p21.

The prevalence and strength of Brexit identities in 2018 appeared to be stronger than attachment to political parties. Findings from the BSA suggest that, of those who voted remain in the 2016 referendum, half had ‘very strong’ attachment to remain, whilst 41% of leavers describe their attachment in similar terms. 13% of those who voted remain described their attachment as ‘not very strong’, compared to 19% of those who voted leave.

The most recent Social Attitude Survey from 2017 found that 67% of those who identify strongly with a political party also identify strongly as a Remainer or Leaver.⁵⁸

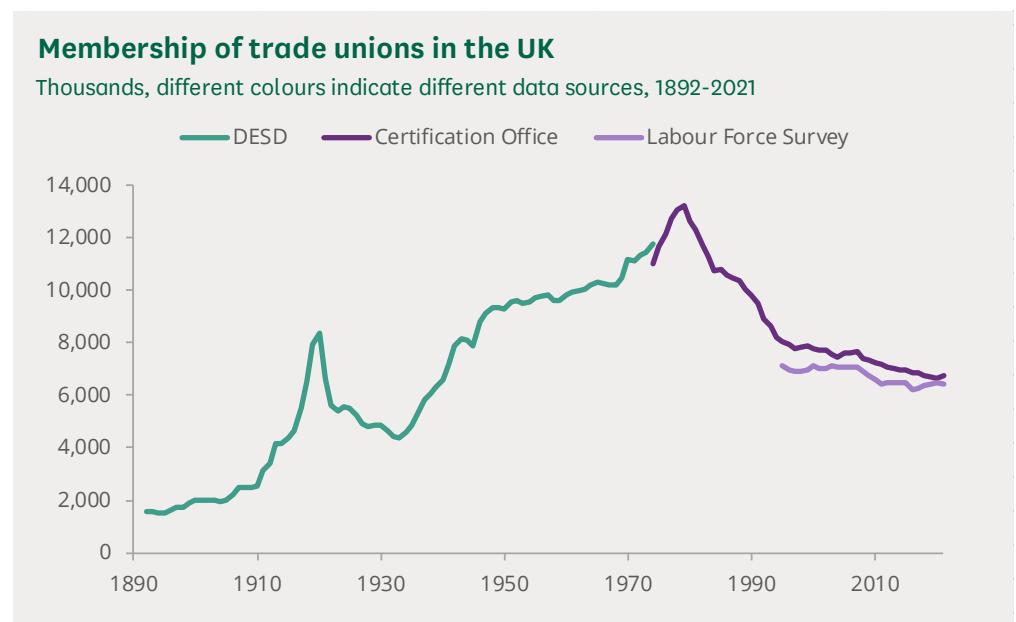
Similar findings were presented in the NatCen and ‘What UK Thinks’ report of 2018.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ [British Social Attitudes Survey 36 The EU debate](#), 2019, p21.

⁵⁹ Curtice J, [‘The emotional legacy of Brexit: how Britain has become a country of “remainers and leavers”](#)’. 2018, p8.

5 Non-party political activity and engagement

5.1 Trade union membership



Sources:

BEIS, [Trade Union Statistics 2021](#) [accessed 31 August 2022]

Certification Office, [Annual reports of the Certification Office](#) (various years) [accessed 31 August 2022]

The chart above shows trade union membership in the UK since 1892. Membership peaked in 1979 at over 13 million employees, before declining sharply.

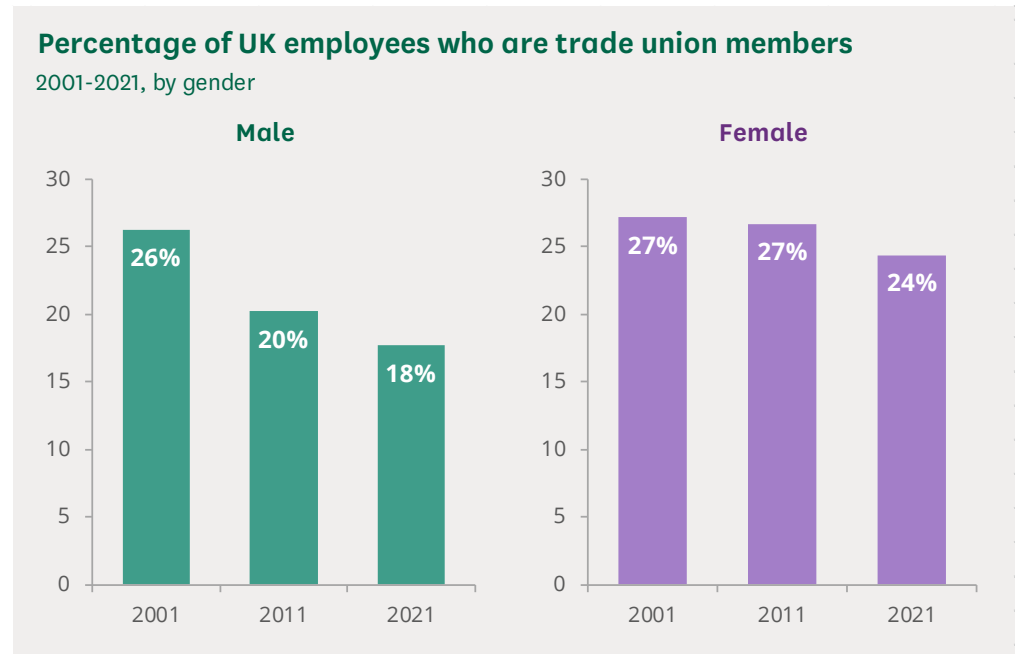
In 2020/21 there were 6.73 million trade union members in the UK according to the Certification Office, a 1% increase on the previous year. The figure from 2019/20 is the lowest total since 1945 according to records kept by the Department of Employment Statistics Division (1892-1974) and the Certification Office (1974-present)⁶⁰.

According to the ONS, 6.4million people - under a quarter of employees (23.1%) - were trade union members in 2021. This was a small decrease from

⁶⁰ Certification Office, [Annual reports of the Certification Office](#). (various years)

23.7% in 2020. This was a similar proportion to 2016 (23.5%) but a decline from the 27.4% of employees seen 2009.⁶¹

Trade union membership nonetheless remains larger than party membership levels by an order of magnitude.



Source: BEIS, [Trade Union Statistics 2021](#) [accessed 31 August 2022]

The chart above shows that female employees are now more likely to be trade union members compared to their male counterparts. In 2021, around 24% of female employees were trade union members, compared to 18% of male employees.

Older individuals are more likely to be trade union members. 63% of trade union member employees were aged over 35 in 2021. Around 50% of public sector employees were union members compared to around 13% of those who worked in private sector.

⁶¹ BEIS, [Trade Union Statistics 2021](#)

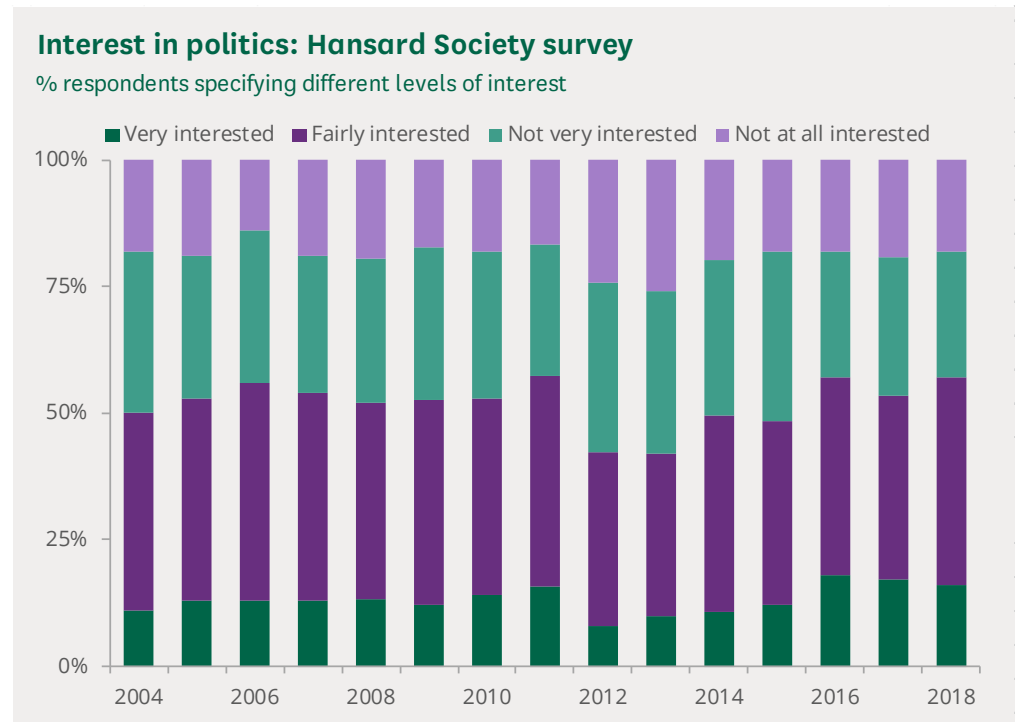


Source: BEIS, [Trade Union Statistics 2021](#) [accessed 31 August 2022]

The chart above shows that while trade union membership fell in every region of the UK from 2001 to 2021, membership ranges from 36% of employees in Wales to 17% in the South-East England. 31% of Northern Irish employees are members of trade unions and 28% of Scottish employees.

5.2

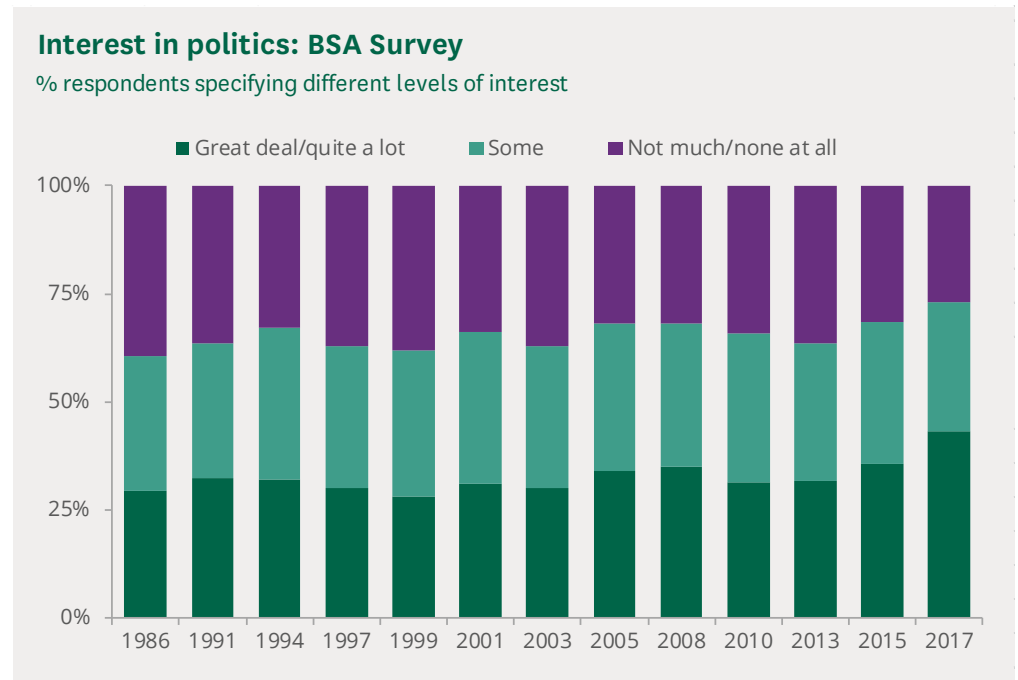
Interest in politics



Source: Hansard Society, [Audit of Political Engagement 15](#), 2018, p37

The Hansard Society’s most recent Audit of Political Engagement (2018) suggests that levels of interest in politics increased slightly compared to the previous year. The share of the White population who are ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ interested in politics was 58% in 2018. Interest in politics among people from Black and minority ethnic groups increased greatly (48% in 2018 compared to 34% in 2017).⁶² In 2018, 41% of 18-24-year-olds surveyed described themselves as ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ interested, compared to 50% in 2016, one group to experience a fall in interest.

⁶² Hansard Society, [Audit of Political Engagement 15 \(PDF\)](#), 2018, p38



Source: [British Social Attitudes Survey 33](#), 2015 [accessed 31 August 2022]; Curtice J and Simpson I, [Why turnout increased in the 2017 General Election](#), 2018, p5

The British Social Attitudes Survey found that overall public interest in politics increased slightly between 1986 and 2015 despite a long-term decline in party membership.⁶³ In 1986, 29% of people said they were interested in politics either a ‘great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’. In 2015, 36% of people did so. The percentage of people describing themselves as having ‘not much’ interest in politics or ‘none at all’ fell from 39% in 1986 to 32% in 2015, after rising to 37% in 2013.

⁶³ Simpson I and Phillips M, 2015, [British Social Attitudes Survey 33: Politics](#)

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